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# Chapter 9
# Where is faith-based youth work heading?

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Since the global financial crash of the early twenty-first century, youth and community work has seen a decrease in funding alongside an increase in need. The effect of the dominantly right-wing response to the fiscal crisis on Western economies has seen both a reduction in state funding for work with young people and communities, as well as a decrease in resources and increase in burden on the charities sector. This has severely impacted on youth work both in contexts where state funding was previously available, and in other contexts where the provision of services for young people relies solely on the voluntary, community and charities sectors.

The years of austerity politics that have followed the financial crisis in the UK have led to severe cuts to state-funded youth work with budgets no longer ring-fenced at national level, and youth services set to be the first public service to completely disappear (Jeffs, 2015). Much youth work has been commissioned out with lower budgets and/or taken on by the struggling charities sector. Possibly the most consistently funded youth work over recent years has been that undertaken by faith groups. Whilst these faith groups have often operated rather separately from secular youth work providers (and even from each other), it is argued that times of challenge also bring opportunities for creative practice (Coburn and Gormally, 2017).

As funding for youth services has declined over recent years in the UK, there has been an increase in partnerships between secular and faith-based providers. These partnerships take various forms including faith-based projects employing non-religious staff or volunteers, local authorities or other funders commissioning work out to faith-based providers, as well as a range of more mutually negotiated, equal partnerships between secular and faith-based providers. Whilst statutory and other secular youth services have been subject to a neoliberal 'targets and outcomes' culture over recent decades, faith-based youth work has largely avoided this (Jeffs, 2015).

This chapter explores what the future of faith-based youth work might look like. In particular, it considers the recent growth in partnership working between faith-based and secular youth work, and the need for this to continue in an uncertain future for public services. It examines how these partnerships increase the capacity for faith-based youth work to contribute to civil society and continue to grow in prominence as a key player in the provision of youth and community services. It also identifies the increasing challenges presented to faith-based youth work by the right-wing ideologies that have gained in prominence in the UK and beyond. These include not just the austerity agenda but also a discourse of surveillance and suspicion. In the UK, this is seen particularly through recent counter-extremism legislation and calls for faith-based youth work providers to be registered, monitored and inspected (Home Office, 2015). Such ideologies of suspicion and surveillance have gained a platform on a global level, perhaps most clearly illustrated by the movements which drove the Brexit vote and the election of Donald Trump as President of the USA.

This backdrop of suspicion makes the increase in partnership working all the more pertinent and crucial in breaking down misunderstandings.

The discussion in this chapter draws on research conducted with 15 youth workers involved in partnership working between Christian and secular organisations. The research brings out the positive and negative experiences of the youth workers and the shared values held between the partners. Whilst this research focused on Christian-secular partnerships in the UK, the discussion connects the findings, albeit to a limited extent, to some wider contexts.

The chapter concludes that the future of faith-based youth work is in the continuation and expansion of such partnerships between the secular and faith-based sectors. These partnerships have a clear role to play in plugging the gaps in provision and enabling workers and organisations to support each other in a climate where they are stretched and under-resourced. The discussion draws on the concept of 'progressive localism' (Featherstone et al, 2011) to argue that these partnerships need to go further to form an active resistance to right-wing ideologies. Both secular and faith-based youth work contain strands and traditions of radical practice that have a role to play in actively and collaboratively resisting neoliberal culture and standing up for those who are most affected by growing inequality (de St Croix, 2010; Pimlott, 2015a).

**What do we mean by faith-based youth work?**

There have been debates within faith-based youth work as to what actually constitutes *youth work* and whether more confessional or proselytising forms of practice fit the definition. In Christian youth work, this has manifested in a debate as to what is youth work and what is youth ministry (Thompson, 2017). Whilst Brierley (2003) suggests that youth ministry is a specialist branch of youth work that focuses on Christian faith transmission, Collins-Mayo et al (2010) distinguish clearly between them as practices with different values and philosophies. Similarly, in Muslim youth work, Hamid (2006) distinguishes between Muslim youth work and Islamic youth work with the former focusing on social education and the latter on teaching Islam. For the purposes of this chapter in a wider youth work text, an interpretation of faith-based youth *work* in its non-confessional form is adopted. Thus, this chapter is not concerned with those forms of youth *ministry* which are focused primarily on faith transmission or that emerge as evangelical or proselytising endeavours directed at non-adherents. Instead, the focus is on the forms of faith-based youth work centrally concerned with engaging with civil society, promoting human flourishing and pursuing the common good, which draw from the well of accepted youth work values, of which there are many manifestations within the faith sector (Pimlott, 2015a; 2015b; Jeffs, 2015; Bright et al, in press).

**Right-wing politics and rolling back state provision.**

Recent years have seen a rise of extreme right politics in various countries. For example, both Brexit and President Trump have emerged from the same right-wing values and rhetoric. This is a political rhetoric that creates divisions and discourages state 'hand-outs'. In the US and the UK, a significant rolling back of the state is underway. This is being implemented in a systematic dismantling of state provision that will not be easily reversed. We can see this through healthcare systems where

significant structural changes, such as the attempts to abolish 'Obamacare' in the US and the restructuring of the NHS to allow more contracts to profit-making providers in the UK, are reforming both the systems and structures themselves, as well as the values and cultures that underpin them. However, growing inequality in these contexts is not just a by-product of right-wing austerity, it is a direct outcome of right-wing policy discourses of 'othering' (see, for example, Pihlaja and Thompson, 2017, on how policy exacerbates the exclusion of young Muslims). Both the Brexit and Trump campaigns catalysed and drew on far-right rhetoric that created division and fear between groups of people, and was, at times, explicitly racist. In regard to religion, a tension exists where, particularly at an institutional level, such campaigns often draw on forms of civic religion (particularly within Christianity). Yet, faith groups are also involved in the resistance, as some of the examples in this chapter demonstrate.

Youth work has never had a statutory footing in the US although there is a well-developed youth development and after-school sector, and, to an extent, a shared academic body of literature with the UK. Recent years have seen discussions of professionalisation and standardised competency frameworks for youth work in the US, but these have, as yet, not emerged, and any hopes for increased state sponsorship for such work seem to be waning. Whilst some of the well-established national organisations delivering youth work are faith-based (see, for example, Young Life and the YMCA movement), there is a history of separation of secular and faith-based practice in both the USA and the UK (Bright et al, in press; Thompson, 2017).

In the UK, statutory youth services have been closed down in some localities, stripped back to the bare bones in others, and have all but disappeared. The non-statutory UK youth work sector spans small and large charities and organisations, with the emergence of social enterprises and even some entirely private profit-making businesses in recent years. Faith-based providers are one of various stakeholders in the current landscape, and arguably one of the least precarious. Since the early twentieth century, faith groups have been reported as holding the largest share of youth work provision, even before statutory decline (Brierley, 2003; Green, 2006; Stanton, 2013).

Over recent years, UK youth work theorists, Mark K. Smith and Tony Jeffs appear to have shown little sympathy for the decline of the statutory sector, and, have even at times championed what they perceive to be the thriving faith-based sector (see for example, Smith, 2015; Jeffs, 2015). In fact, Jeffs and Smith predicted as early as the 1980s that youth work's professionalised 'local authority' era in the UK would come to an end (see Jeffs, 1982; Jeffs and Smith, 1987; Jeffs and Smith, 1990; Jeffs and Smith, 1993; Jeffs and Smith, 2006; Jeffs and Spence, 2008). However, they also recognise that this does not mean the end of grassroots youth work, largely because youth work is alive and well in the faith-based sector, particularly in Christian practice (Smith, 2015; Jeffs, 2015). Jeffs, in particular, states that 'whenever discussion of "a youth work crisis" occurs it is important to recall the "crisis" relates almost exclusively to secular units' (Jeffs, 2015: 11). He frames the distinction between secular and faith-based youth work in relation to the presence of shared values:

> *'Secular and statutory youth work clearly has much to learn from both the faith-based and uniformed sectors... Faith-based youth work is doing so much better, by comparison, primarily because it operates according to a set of shared internal beliefs – educational and spiritual. Beliefs that mean it has ambitions both for itself and those it seeks to serve. By way*

*of comparison one encounters only a void at the heart of secular and statutory funded youth work*' (Jeffs, 2015: 14).

Jeffs' analysis of the decline of secular youth work is largely related to its distortion by the neoliberal culture of recent decades with its emphasis on targets and outcomes in youth work. He suggests national voluntary sector organisations have been 'hollowed out' in the same way as state-funded organisations:

> *'Frankly the latter now needs a reason to exist; a justification over and above a self-serving wish to pay their wage-bills. Until better reasons to flourish are articulated the national organisations will continue to 'hollow-out' and clubs and units carry on vanishing. Not least because individuals will not freely give of their time to 'dance to the tune of others' nor will young people in any number seek to affiliate to organisations that ultimately only need them to meet targets and secure funding'* (Jeffs, 2015: 14).

This is a view supported by the *In Defence of Youth Work* campaign in the UK, which was formed in 2009 before austerity kicked in, in critique of the increasing prevalence of market values in youth work (IDYW, 2009).


**Plugging the gaps?**

The faith-based and secular youth work sectors have typically been very separate from each other. However, the faith-based sector has regained prominence in the field over recent decades. This is due to a combination of factors including cutbacks to secular services, alongside relative stability in the faith-based sector, as well as some youth workers actively bridging the divide to form secular-faith partnerships. Separation between the sectors has arguably been exacerbated by mutual suspicion from both sides, although suspicion of faith-based youth work by the wider field has been more widely reported (Clayton and Stanton, 2008; Hart, 2016). Anecdotally, at the national level in the UK, it is possible to find both recent examples of separation and of reaching out. For example, the former National Council for Voluntary Youth Services (NCVYS) did not appear to make any significant attempt to include the faith-based sector in its networks. The *In Defence of Youth Work* campaign however made bringing together the secular and faith-based sectors the theme of its 2015 national conference, recognising a shared resistance to neoliberalism. The largest part of the UK faith sector is Christian (indeed, it is the largest youth work sector overall); they have largely tended to organise their own conferences and training programmes even where laying claim to youth work standards and frameworks developed in the wider field.

Whilst it could be tempting in a dominantly secular text to simply consider the role of faith groups in plugging gaps left by the state and other cutbacks to youth work provision, it is instead important to emphasise that faith-based youth work has a long history that precedes state and secular funding:

> *'The origins of faith-based youth work, and indeed youth work more generally, lie in the Sunday School movements of the UK and America and in Jewish youth work, which were developed as lay movements in response to social need (Jeffs and Spence, 2011; Lynn and Wright, 1971; Pimlott, 2015b; Stanton, 2011). The largest sector of the UK youth work field (Brierley, 2003; Green, 2006; Stanton, 2013), and a significant player in community-based*

*provision in other contexts such as Australia and the USA, faith-based practice has had an influential role in youth work's history and development… it remains important to recognise its significance across time and place, rather than as a 'poor relation' to the wider field'* (Bright et al, in press).

In the UK in the late 1700s and in the US in the early 1800s, the early Sunday Schools emerged before any form of statutory education existed to teach young people to read and write on their only day off from work (Thompson, 2017). The national voluntary sector network, UK Youth (previously the National Association of Girls' Clubs) was borne, in part, out of the Jewish girls' work movement in the UK (Jeffs and Spence, 2011). As such, faith-based youth work existed long before the welfare state in the UK and did not emerge in response to its decline. Arguably though, much faith-based youth work may have developed in recognition of state absence, particularly in the international context where state-sponsored youth work is a rarity.

Faith-based practice has arguably played a role in both colluding with and challenging the austerity agenda in the UK. When the Church of England was reported to be receiving £5 million of 'Big Society' funding, the National Secular Society accused them of 'colluding in the destruction of the welfare state' (National Secular Society, 2010). By contrast, faith-based organisations such as The Trussell Trust have both provided for those affected by welfare reform and challenged the political discourse underpinning it (The Trussell Trust, 2017). At the local level, faith-based organisations have continued to provide services for their local communities, and many children and young people in the UK will have, for example, attended some form of activity in a church hall; whether play groups, after-school clubs, holiday clubs, youth clubs, or uniformed groups. These local services are not new initiatives developed in times of austerity, but have long existed as part of children's and youth provision in local communities. Such forms of faith-based provision have, however, potentially become more visible, particularly where faith-based and secular partnerships have emerged, whether through contracts from local authorities looking to commission out services previously delivered in-house, or as part of local partnerships looking to provide joined-up services in areas where other provision has declined or ceased.

**Progressive localism – the way forward?**

It is through collaborative partnerships, rather than through relying on one benevolent, paternal funder, that the youth work sector is likely to sustain itself in any of the world's economies. The austerity climate might even be a catalyst for such work in some contexts. In the UK, austerity has been tied up in policy discourses that emphasise communities sustaining themselves through the mantras of 'Big Society' and 'Localism' introduced under David Cameron's Coalition Government (2010-15). Its youth statement, Positive for Youth (2011) draws on these philosophies of rolling back the state and local and community organisations sustaining what was previously protected through statutory funding.

It was in this climate of austerity, localism and of state residualism, that Featherstone et al (2011) introduced the concept of 'progressive localism' as a possible way forward. It is worth emphasising here that David Featherstone and his colleagues are deeply critical of 'austerity localism' and frame it as the latest implementation of a form of politically driven neoliberalism that imposes market

values on public services in order to justify the reduction of welfare provision. As such, 'progressive localism' is not a collusion with neoliberalism (as in the receipt of 'Big Society' funding to simply replace what was previously state-provided but with less money), but involves active resistance to it (as in the campaigning against the damaging effects of the erosion of welfare). Featherstone et al's (2011) 'progressive localism' is politically active rather than politically compliant; it opposes austerity and resists neoliberalism.

Arguably, therefore, forming genuinely collaborative partnerships in a marketized culture of competitiveness could subvert neoliberal values. However, for organisations committed to social justice, there is a need to go beyond simply resisting the values of the market to explicitly challenge the division and inequality created by right-wing discourses of austerity and fear. A recent example of such a manifestation of radical 'progressive localism' can be seen in the response to the Grenfell Tower fire in London in 2017. The fire in a social housing apartment block caused at least 70 deaths (although at the time of writing the exact number remains unconfirmed) and made many more people homeless. In response, local community organisations including mosques and churches came together, to provide shelter and food, and to act as donation centres. The response has also included locally-led campaigns to raise awareness of the inadequacy and unsafe nature of the housing being provided for Britain's poorest. The Christian-founded Trussell Trust is another UK example of 'progressive localism'; it partners with local organisations including churches and other community buildings to house and staff food banks. Alongside this local provision, it campaigns against austerity and poverty, raising awareness of poverty and hunger at local and national levels.

**Models of partnership**

The different forms of partnership that emerge to support local youth work appear to have different levels of potential in achieving the aim of 'progressive localism'. The primary qualitative research outlined below took place with 15 youth workers working in Christian-secular partnerships of some form. The discussion explores the various models of partnership as well as the values and tensions that emerge from the youth workers' experiences. Of the 15 youth workers who shared their experiences of partnership working, all but one were the Christian partner; therefore, the narratives explored below represent primarily the perspectives of the Christian youth workers in such partnerships. Three dominant models of partnership emerged from the research:

***Model 1: Christian organisations employing non-Christian staff and volunteers***

One of the forms of partnership that emerged was where the church or Christian organisation employed non-Christian staff or volunteers. This was most prevalent in relation to the employment of non-Christian volunteers to help out with church-based youth work where there was a shortage of willing volunteers from within the congregation. However, some examples of purposefully employing staff or volunteers from wider backgrounds also exist. One youth worker running a youth club in a cathedral explained how he employed volunteers from among the older young people most of whom were not Christians themselves: "I run a nominally Christian youth group for the Cathedral, but I have very few Christian volunteers. Most of the volunteers are young people themselves and have little or no church background." This youth worker saw this as part of an empowering and grassroots practice where volunteers emerge from within the existing community rather than being

recruited into it. As many of the volunteers were older young people nurtured through the youth group, he viewed it as a key facet of his practice. He felt that it facilitated an 'ethos of inclusivity' within the church stating that: "The fact that our volunteers are mostly not Christian sends a message about inclusivity and acceptance to the young people. We are a church, but all are welcome, and invited to contribute." On a practical level, this youth worker also explained that it meant he was able to employ volunteers based on their ability to engage with young people, rather than simply their 'creedal agreement'.

### Model 2: secular funding commissioned to Christian providers

Another dominant model of partnership between the Christian and secular sectors involves churches or Christian organisations receiving funding from local authorities or other secular commissioners to deliver youth work provision in a local area. In the youth workers' experiences, these partnerships were, in some cases, based on collaborative relationships with the funder. However, in others, it was felt that no real relationship existed between the partners:

> "The project simply received funding from the local authority. Records were kept to show how much work was taking place and occasionally there would be a monitoring visit. Other than fulfilling their contractual obligation with the local authority there really wasn't much in terms of collaboration."

It is arguable that in contractual relationships with 'the state' such as this one, that it is particularly difficult to actively challenge neoliberal agendas, and that these forms of partnerships might even be interpreted as colluding with politically-driven austerity localism, however well-intentioned the workers. The youth workers recognised some of the challenges that receiving secular funding threw up such as their work feeling disjointed, or having to adapt it to the changing priorities of the funder.

There were examples where the receipt of such funding was based on more collaborative principles. One youth worker explained how an ongoing relationship of trust had been built with the local council through the church's delivery of community-based youth work for several years before receiving funding to do so. He stated: 'The local councils were brave enough to "hire" a church to run their youth provision despite a number of reservations. I was told by one councillor that "despite all the God stuff, the church has earned our respect"'. In such examples where trust and respect has been built over time, there is more potential for faith-based partners to resist neoliberal cultures and to shape the work around more holistic values than those of the market. The same youth worker stated that "We were also able to do it in our own way - avoiding any pre-defined outcomes such as targets or accreditation.". This suggests there is potential through such partnerships to resist the neoliberal 'targets and outcomes' culture that has been imposed on youth work in recent decades.

### Model 3: equal partnerships

The most positively discussed model of joint working was that based on equal partnerships between Christian and secular organisations. These partnerships were motivated by a shared desire for social justice, and to engage with, and respond to the needs of the local community. The forms of work delivered through these partnerships were varied and included youth clubs, youth forums, detached youth work, schools work, drop-in sessions and advice, guidance and support services for young

people. One youth worker explained how local youth workers had formed a collaborative network to ensure they were working together in meeting the needs of their community. In this case, the network was formed and led by the church-employed youth worker:

> "We run a local activity network of all local interested groups in providing positive activities for children, young people and families. We meet every six weeks, give updates on work, identify gaps in provision, and then collaborate to fill those gaps. Sometimes this includes fundraising, sometimes just creative working. It has led to holiday clubs, lunch clubs, trips, residentials, play days and targeted work. For example, we realised that at Halloween there was often a spike in anti-social behaviour, so we collaborated between four agencies and took twenty of the most likely offenders away for the night. This was a great trip, and it reduced anti-social behaviour on the estate at home."

By collaborating to fund and deliver their work, rather than compete against each other, partnerships such as these go some way to resisting neoliberal culture. However, it isn't clear how far they go beyond 'filling gaps' to actively resist or campaign against austerity in the ways suggested by 'progressive localism'.

**Shared values – towards the common good**

The youth workers in the study identified a number of shared values they had in common with their partners. These included: believing in young people; contributing to their wellbeing; having fun; providing safe spaces; offering support; respecting young people and each other; working together; and building community. A unique feature of the partnerships was that a collaboration between secular and faith-based providers allows for a holistic understanding of young people's wellbeing that includes their spiritual development. The only non-Christian youth worker in the sample related a positive experience of working with Christian youth workers, suggesting that the work was richer for their input and expertise:

> "From a secular point of view, the Church has never asked that we make religion a part of our provision. Young people have naturally brought discussions about their faith to us and we have had the resources to discuss and answer. The Church workers have never been worried about discussing other faiths and have always approached the topic with honesty and respect."

The youth workers also felt that working in partnership meant that the local offer available to young people was enhanced and the overall quality of youth work in the area improved:

> "Doing things together builds relationships between partners. This then improves collaboration, shared values, referrals between projects, joined-up working… Working together creates additional capacity, avoids duplicating things, and means that resources go further. It also stops people feeling isolated, and it puts a check on whether other people think your work is helpful… Working together eventually builds a better place for everyone. That's what I hope anyway."

This understanding of working together to build 'a better place for everyone' goes beyond simply plugging gaps in provision to a shared pursuit of the common good. The youth workers also

understood the partnerships as having a role in reducing divisions between people particularly through bringing both youth workers and young people from different backgrounds together:

> "We ran a residential for young people from all over the district. This meant that while I was able to support other youth workers, funded by the parish councils, I was also able to take young people from the church along. While there, they got the opportunity to work with and get to know other young people from all over the area. This opportunity wouldn't have come about had I not been a part of the secular team as well."

This suggests that such partnerships may, implicitly at least, be challenging right-wing discourses of division and fear, and subverting neoliberalism by resisting the 'targets and outcomes' culture. However, explicit examples of the partnerships being used to actively resist or campaign against poverty, austerity and inequality did not emerge in the narratives of the small sample of youth workers involved with the research. There were, however, signs of and clear potential for 'progressive localism' to be catalysed through these partnerships and in the values the youth workers professed to underpin them.

**Partnerships in tension**

The youth workers' experiences of their partnership working was largely positive. When directly asked about tensions, however, some did emerge. The most common issue that respondents identified as causing some tension was where suspicion existed between partners. Significantly though, several of the youth workers reported that suspicion is reduced and understanding increased by the process of working together and building relationships with each other.

There were some examples of negative experiences that related to bad practice on the part of both the Christian and secular partners in certain situations. One Christian youth worker expressed his discomfort at the way his former employing organisation had misled funders about the work they were delivering, describing them as "two-faced":

> "Privately the Christian [organisation] was vehemently evangelical in its outlook. It would only employ Christian youth workers. There was a clear agenda of wanting to evangelise to the young people. However, this was never articulated in the contractual agreement to deliver open access youth work on behalf of the local authority."

Other tensions emerged where one partner felt exploited by the other. One Christian youth worker said he felt his organisation was 'used' by the secular partner:

> "We enabled them to hit all their funders' targets, because we had done the hard graft of building the relationships, whilst they had more funding, were better paid and would not have succeeded without us, but this was not reflected in any contribution to our costs."

It was also stated that the vision of the work could be compromised by working together or receiving funding from secular partners, perhaps reflecting the imposition of neoliberal values on state-funded youth work:

*"Our vision and our ability to change and react to circumstances has felt very restricted by the money. Because they want a certain style and amount of work, we weren't always free to use our time and resources to best help the young people. This is partly because our understanding of helping young people does not necessarily line up with the Council's."*

It should be noted here that for the Christian youth workers it was not always the secular partner that they were in tension with in such cases. The church-employed youth workers also reported that it was sometimes the church that created tensions when a youth worker attempted to work with external partners, where the wider church did not share the vision or see value in such work.

The youth workers' experiences of partnership working were positive overall, and they could all identify shared values between the Christian and secular partners in the overall pursuit of the common good. However, a key tension that appeared to exist in some of the partnerships is whether there was shared agreement, implicit or explicit, on whether they were resisting or complying with neoliberalism and austerity politics. Where partnerships were focused primarily on funding or on meeting targets, it could be suggested that the ability for either partner to be actively resistant to neoliberalism was greatly inhibited.

**Wider contexts**

The primary research discussed in this chapter is limited to a small sample of youth workers engaged in Christian-secular partnerships in the UK. There are clearly many more contexts in which faith-based youth workers from various traditions and in various countries actively contribute to civil society through their work with young people. Whilst there is not space here to give recognition to them all, it is worth identifying some recent examples.

Recent UK research (Bright et al., in press; Thompson et al, forthcoming) outlines the experiences of youth workers from various faith groups who are engaging with their wider communities and resisting the right-wing discourses of division and austerity, both implicitly and explicitly. One of their research participants, for example, was a Sikh youth work volunteer who established a youth led committee in his Gurdwara in Scotland. He was also working both within his local community and bringing them into the Gurdwara to foster inclusion and understanding between Sikh and non-Sikh community members. Bright et al also interviewed a Christian youth worker and Muslim youth worker both working for the same Christian-run project that encourages inter-faith dialogue between young people, demonstrating a purposeful example of partnership in a faith-based organisation employing people not from the particular faith tradition in order to foster inclusivity. Also encouraging inter-faith dialogue, a Jewish youth worker in the research was fostering conversations with Muslim young people, and the leader of a Muslim Scout group was working in partnership with local Sikh and Christian Scout groups to run joint events, and visit each other's places of worship.

In his research with young British Sikhs, Singh (2015) found that these young people were keen to engage with their wider communities and joined in with local community efforts including the responses to the major floods in the south of England in 2014. Young Sikhs were also involved in langar which is the sharing of food that typically takes place in the Gurdwara. In recent years, the

number of non-Sikhs attending Gurdwaras to share langar has grown significantly, and they have become an active movement in feeding the homeless. Singh outlines how this is happening on a global level with the UK's 250 Gurdwaras alone serving an estimated 5000 meals to non-Sikhs each week. Singh also identifies how some young Sikhs have been involved in taking langar out of the Gurdwara into their wider communities to operate as food banks feeding those living in poverty. He identifies examples of this in the UK, Canada, and the USA.

There are however very real challenges to fostering these forms of practice. The neoliberal climate often pits different groups against each other in competing for funding, establishing who owns certain 'outcomes' and identifying whose work is having most impact or 'return'. Alongside this, divisive policy such as counter-extremism legislation exacerbates tensions between different groups. Khan (2013) outlines how the Preventing Violent Extremism legislation in the UK creates suspicion and stigma and isolates Muslim young people and communities in particular. This climate of suspicion and fear also impacts on other groups. Recent media reporting in the UK, Canada and elsewhere suggests Sikh communities have faced a similar backlash to Muslim groups. Inspection and monitoring of all faith-based providers working with children and young people is promised by the UK's Counter-extremism Strategy (Home Office, 2015). These tensions, however, only make partnerships and shared understandings more crucial to subverting the climate of fear, fostering dialogue and understanding, and breaking down divisions. In this regard, faith-based youth work has a distinct role to play in engaging with civil society, working towards the common good and challenging inequalities (Pimlott, 2015a; 2015b).


**Conclusion**

Faith-based youth work has a long history of contributing to civil society, and recent years have seen an increase in faith groups working in partnership with other stakeholders in the pursuit of the common good (Pimlott, 2015b). Featherstone et al's (2011) concept of 'progressive localism' offers a useful framework for understanding the potential of such partnerships to resist inequality and effect change. It is a concept that fits most closely with the examples of the more mutually negotiated, equal partnerships explored here that go some way to subverting neoliberalism by prioritising collaboration over competition. The potential impact of such progressive partnerships lies in how far they move beyond a passive plugging of gaps in provision towards an active resistance and subversion of neoliberal culture.

Although the Christian youth workers in the study explored here were perhaps less focused on outcomes and targets than their secular partners, they did, at times, speak the language of neoliberalism when discussing their partnership work. They recognised where partners were "more interested in profile, money, targets, etcetera" and how they contribute to this. There was a sense among some of the Christian youth workers of being used for such outcomes at times. However, when discussing the shared values of the work, they did not draw on bureaucratic or neoliberal language such as 'funders' targets', but on positive, asset-focused ideas and concepts that fit with the idea of working for the common good such as 'believing in young people' and 'creating community'.

These partnerships are, arguably, the future of progressive faith-based youth work that engages civil

society and supports the wider youth work sector. Moving into the future, more integrated models of training and practice would support the development of these progressive partnerships as a mainstream approach to youth work. This is a new and innovative area of practice that has real potential to develop into a framework for a more integrated approach to youth work where colleagues from different traditions and backgrounds can support each other, break down division and intolerance and work holistically with diverse groups of young people. Secular and faith-based youth workers have historically worked and trained separately, with even inter-faith work not engaging with non-religious partners.

As such partnerships continue to increase, they need to develop an ongoing resilience to the neoliberal climate which often encourages competitiveness over collaboration. They need to foster genuine collaboration, mutual support and the pursuit of shared values for the good of young people. This was present in the youth workers' narratives in this research through their identification of shared values such as working together and building community. Youth work has a history of political and radical practice both in the secular and faith-based sectors (de St Croix, 2010; Pimlott, 2015a). As such, albeit not without tensions, these progressive partnerships have the potential to move into the future as active agents in the subversion of neoliberalism, the championing of social justice, and in the fight against growing inequality.

**Acknowledgement**

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